

Who is that Girl I See?

by Vera Lee

“Carolyn Larkins?”

“Here.”

There’s a pause. Carolyn’s name now hits my brain like an alarm going off, reminding me to put whatever conversation I’m having on hold in order to respond to the alias next on the list. I can’t even count the number of times that I haven’t registered the name as my own.

“Um, Ling? Ling Kwo Lee?”

My pre-calc class chuckles at the substitute’s ignorance as I wink at the Romanian exchange student to the right of me, shoot my hand in the air, and claim the foreign name assigned to me at birth. “I’m here.”

I moved to America from Hong Kong when I was six months old. In my early years, my parents spoke to me only in Cantonese, trying to avoid any hint of a Chinese accent in my English. The language that came out of my mouth, and the dialect that my mind worked in was Cantonese.

However, I was exposed to English very early in life; I actually don’t remember *not* being able to understand it. I do have a very distinct memory of learning the word “frisbee,” though. I was picking cherry tomatoes at a farm in Illinois, and my sister wanted to throw a frisbee around. I remember asking her what “fei pan” was in English, and so she introduced me to the new word.

Because I learned Cantonese and English at the same time, I ultimately developed a strong accent – exactly what my parents didn’t want. However, it was not a Chinese accent in my English. Instead, it was an English accent in my Cantonese! Their friends all laughed when I spoke, noting how Americanized I was becoming. I remember not being sure whether that was a good or bad thing. Despite my fault in diction, I still thought in Cantonese, even as my English steadily strengthened.

Eventually, the teasing got to me and I stopped speaking Cantonese altogether. I was tired of being ridiculed because I couldn’t represent my heritage well enough. It was very *Mulan*, except with a different ending. Over ten years, solely speaking in English has had an unfortunate effect. I am no longer bilingual. All the thoughts that spark, swim, and sometimes stomp through my mind are entirely English. I can recall a few Chinese words, but attempting to speak is like a baby babbling. The mind is magnificent, though, and I still fluently understand Chinese.

Now, when I introduce myself, I say, “Hi, I’m Vera.” And I truly am. My birth certificate may read “Ling Kwo,” but I am proud to say that I am a Chinese-American girl who can write a forty-page paper on the political change between Washington’s and Obama’s administrations, as well

as rap Chris Brown's "Look At Me Now" in its entirety. One day, I hope to relearn my native tongue, but for now, I fully embrace my heterogeneous culture just the way it is.